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ABSTRACT

Four hundred faculty members in the six different colleges at Murray State University, Kentucky, were surveyed to determine students' attitudes toward writing, faculty members' perceptions of student writing ability, and faculty members' use of writing in their own disciplines. Tentative conclusions from survey findings suggest that faculty members: (1) strongly support both the basic freshman composition requirement and the emphasis upon writing in general education courses; (2) endorse upper division writing courses; (3) accept responsibility for teaching writing skills in their own disciplines, but would like to learn to use writing more effectively in teaching concepts; (4) see students as having major problems in controlling their subject matter and editing their writing; and (5) express concern about their students' writing difficulties and offer help during the composing process. Indicating faculty commitment to writing excellence, the survey results suggest that measures to strengthen the university's writing program--such as establishing a committee to enhance the quality of student writing and increasing interdepartmental communication on instructional practices--would receive strong faculty support. (A copy of the survey instrument is appended.) (MM)

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Survey of Writing
in
Various Disciplines

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MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY
Murray, Kentucky

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207653

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the teaching of writing has been thought to be the province of English departments, for it is in courses such as freshman English that students encounter their first strong emphasis upon writing at the college level. However, what happens to the development of students' writing skills once they leave the traditional freshman composition class often is not clear. Little communication occurs among instructors in the freshman English program and instructors in other disciplines concerning what writing skills students may need, the amount of writing students do in other classes, and how writing effectiveness is regarded in other disciplines. As a result of increasing pressure from business and other professions to have college graduates be competent writers and communicators in their chosen field, a number of colleges and universities have begun to place increasing emphasis upon writing beyond the freshman level. This emphasis has led to acceptance of the idea that writing is an essential form of discovery and communication in any subject area; therefore, instructors in all disciplines are, in a sense, teachers of writing.

To determine what the status of writing instruction is in all disciplines at Murray State University and what, if anything, may be done to meet the increased emphasis on students' writing competency, a survey was developed and administered to faculty in the six colleges at the University: Business and Public Affairs, Creative Expression, Environmental Sciences, Human Development and Learning, Humanistic Studies, and Industry and Technology. This survey was designed to examine the following concerns:

- A. Students' attitudes toward writing
- B. Faculty's perceptions of university requirements for writing
- C. Faculty's use of writing in their disciplines
- D. Faculty's perceptions of students' writing practices, abilities and problems
- E. Faculty's instructional practices using writing or reinforcing writing skills in their classes

Design

The survey design, consisting of 65 items, was adapted from that of similar surveys carried out at the University of Texas,¹ the University of Washington,² Beaver College (Pennsylvania),³ Plymouth State College (New Hampshire),⁴ and by The English Journal, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English.⁵

Administration of the Survey

A letter explaining the purpose of the survey and a copy of the instrument itself with accompanying answer sheet (see appendix) were sent to 400 faculty members representing the population of the six colleges at Murray State University. Staff in the Teaching and Media Resource Center assisted in the development and distribution of the materials. Faculty members were given three weeks to complete the survey and return it to the Teaching and Media Resource Center. The return rate was 37 percent.

FINDINGS

A. Students' Attitudes Toward Writing

It is commonly assumed that students seldom identify writing as one of their favorite activities. This assumption was reinforced by 88% of the respondents who indicated that their students did not appear to enjoy writing. This attitude toward writing often surfaces in freshman writing courses when students ask their instructors why learning to write effectively is important. The standard reply is that students will need to communicate effectively in their other courses and during their careers. But only 39% of the survey respondents reported that students seem to perceive that importance.

B. University Requirements for Writing

At the present time, students at Murray State University must complete six hours of freshman English before graduating. These six hours may be completed at any time prior to graduation although students are encouraged to complete the requirements as soon as possible. At Murray State University, entering freshmen are placed in the composition program at one of the three levels. Students with an English ACT score of 14 or below are required to take and pass English 100 before

moving into the regular composition sequence. Students with English ACT scores between 15 and 25 are required to take English 101 and English 102; students with ACT scores of 25 or better may elect to take English 104, Honors English.

In assessing the importance of this requirement, 90% of the faculty respondents believe that students at MSU should be required to demonstrate a satisfactory level of both reading and writing proficiency before graduation and 92% believe that Freshmen Composition should be a required course for all students.

C. Interdisciplinary Concerns

Although faculty in English departments traditionally have been expected to develop students' writing skills, 95% of the faculty respondents do not believe that only faculty in the English department should concern themselves with students' writing performance. 90% of the respondents believe that faculty in various disciplines can work together to improve students' writing skills and 87% believe that writing should be stressed and practiced in all General Education courses.

The question of whether students ought to have additional training in writing within their chosen major field elicited less agreement. Forty-nine percent agreed that students should take an upper division writing course while 30% disagreed and 19% were undecided. However, only 16% of the respondents indicated that their departments regularly teach an upper division writing course for their majors.

When queried as to what uses writing might have within their disciplines, 75% of the respondents indicated they believe that writing not only can be used to test students to determine if they have learned concepts but also it can be used to teach concepts and to explore ideas in a subject. 14% remains undecided on the issue. Asked if essay examinations reveal more accurately than objective tests what students have learned, 52% of the respondents indicated yes, 32% indicated no and 13% were undecided.

When asked to comment on the quality of their students' writing abilities, 52% of the respondents believed that students have difficulty writing papers for their classes, while only 21% of the respondents said they saw no evidence of such difficulty. 47% of the faculty indicated they saw no evidence of revision in their students'

papers, 34% said they did, and 10% were undecided. Overall, however, 92% of the respondents felt that serious problems existed in their students' writing and identified a number of areas where those problems could be found. (See Table 1 below).

TABLE 1

Problems in Students' Writing

	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>NO ANSWER</u>
Organization	69%	19%	4%	6%
Narrowing a topic	58%	20%	12%	7%
Supporting an idea	66%	19%	7%	6%
Sense of purpose	51%	28%	13%	7%
Awareness of Audience	35%	35%	22%	7%
Voice	30%	27%	34%	7%
Tone	22%	32%	37%	7%
Style	56%	20%	15%	7%
Coherence	64%	22%	5%	7%
Unity	67%	17%	8%	7%
Paragraph structure	57%	26%	8%	7%
Sentence construction	64%	26%	3%	6%
Grammar	70%	20%	2%	5%
Usage	61%	23%	9%	5%
Transitions	59%	22%	11%	7%
Revising	47%	24%	20%	7%
Research skills	63%	22%	7%	6%
Capitalization	28%	59%	5%	6%
Punctuation	63%	27%	3%	5%
Spelling	67%	26%	0.7%	5%
Proofreading	71%	15%	7%	5%

D. Instructional Practices for Using Writing

The survey contained a number of questions about how faculty are using and/or teaching writing in their classes. For example, some questions focused on practices an instructor might use prior to students' submitting their final copies of papers. 65% of the respondents indicated they encourage students to have conferences about preliminary drafts of a paper and 75% encourage students to revise their work before submitting; however, as noted earlier, only 47% of the respondents indicated they saw evidence of revision in their students' papers.

When queried about assignments, 51% of the faculty responding indicated that all their writing assignments include a precise explanation of purpose, audience and form; 49% indicated they ask students to write for audiences other than just the instructor and 62% of the instructors indicated that students are permitted to use

the first person pronoun (I) in some of their writing. In terms of the length for the majority of writing assignments, 59% of the respondents said that most of their assignments required at least 500-1,000 word responses. Faculty were asked to identify the types of assignments required in their classes; the results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Types of Writing

	<u>NEVER</u>	<u>SOMETIMES</u>	<u>REGULARLY</u>	<u>NO RESPONSE</u>
Book reviews	42%	38%	10%	8%
Article reviews	22%	48%	22%	6%
Abstracts	43%	36%	13%	6%
Lab reports	59%	16%	17%	6%
Research papers	12%	45%	35%	6%
Business reports	73%	12%	7%	6%
Letters	71%	15%	7%	6%
Critical/analytical essays	34%	37%	22%	6%
Lesson plans/unit plans	51%	20%	20%	7%
Observation logs	47%	30%	15%	7%
Journals	49%	33%	10%	7%
Creative writing	77%	13%	2%	7%
Scripts	77%	12%	3%	7%
Essay Exams	15%	24%	52%	7%

The survey also explored instructors' grading practices. Only 20% of the respondents indicated that they grade student written work solely on the basis of content. 39% said that writing quality receives equal weight with content in determining a grade. 77% of the faculty said they place written comments on students' papers, indicating strengths and weaknesses in students' writing skills, and 83% of the faculty return students' papers promptly. Only 21% of the respondents indicated that they were unfamiliar with methods of evaluating students' writing for anything beyond content in their disciplines, while 29% said they felt uncomfortable dealing with students' writing problems. However, 67% of the faculty responding said they would be interested in participating in seminars which would make them more familiar with ways of improving students' writing in their disciplines.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The 37% return on the survey permits some tentative conclusions about writing in the disciplines at Murray State University.

1. FACULTY STRONGLY SUPPORT THE BASIC FRESHMAN COMPOSITION REQUIREMENT AND EMPHASIS UPON WRITING IN GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES.

Although there were no anecdotal responses to the survey in which faculty members offered specific reasons for supporting the freshman composition requirements, the percentage of faculty indicating their support is heartening. Such support suggests that faculty perceive writing as an important skill for students in dealing with academic work. That amount of support also suggests that greater dialogue might take place between the English department and other departments so that reinforcement of writing skills can be consistent and useful. The support for stressing writing in the General Education Courses also is important to note; already some of the IDC courses in the humanities include a writing component.

2. FACULTY ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEACHING WRITING SKILLS IN THEIR OWN DISCIPLINES AND ENDORSE THE OFFERING OF UPPER DIVISION WRITING COURSES.

Faculty, by indicating their agreement that writing should be taught and/or reinforced in their disciplines, seem to accept the fact that students need continued help with, and emphasis on, their writing as they proceed through their academic work. Because different disciplines call for different writing tasks, purposes and audiences, faculty in a discipline are perhaps best qualified to help students understand these differences.

As part of this reinforcement, faculty appear to support the concept of upper division writing courses; however, few departments or even colleges have such offerings at this time. In some cases the English department provides assistance by offering two levels of technical writing as well as an advanced composition course; the latter, however, is offered only infrequently.

Devising a special course that emphasizes writing for a specific discipline may not always be necessary; many departments in other universities have simply designated some of their upper division courses as "W" or writing courses; this "W" designation means that along with regular subject matter, heavy emphasis will be placed on writing; students frequently have to take two or more of these "W" courses before completing their major. Another way of addressing the problem is through proficiency

tests given at the end of the junior year; students must pass a writing examination in their field or must seek remediation until they can establish an acceptable level of writing skills in their discipline.

3. FACULTY ENDORSE THE IDEA THAT WRITING CAN BE USED TO TEACH CONCEPTS.

The essay test is still a popular way at Murray State University to stress writing in a course, but MSU's faculty indicate they also accept the premise that writing can be a means for learning; assignments which call for journal writing, analytical or argumentative essays, reports, and research can assist students in perceiving that writing is a means for discovery and communication in their major field. Results of the survey, however, suggest that the design of writing assignments and how they are presented may be major weaknesses in some academic departments. Assignments need to be established carefully and monitored throughout if they are to have a lasting effect upon students' perceptions of the value of writing as well as upon students' writing skills. The design of such writing assignments encompasses much more than might be expected, as can be seen from the model outlined below.

A DESIGN FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Specify the topic (but note that a topic is not an assignment).
2. Specify the questions or problems raised by the topic.
3. Specify the needed knowledge/research: sources.
4. State the assignment.
5. Specify the purpose of the assignment:
 - e.g. to evaluate sources
 - to synthesize data
 - to solve an unknown
 - to argue for an interpretation
 - to describe
 - to explain
 - to define
 - to compare/contrast
 - to analyze
6. Specify audience: teacher, the class, a child, an adult, a skilled or unskilled population, a relative, readers of a publication, a superior.
7. Specify format: paragraph, journal entry, book review, summary, report, abstract, critical essay, experiential essay, letter, note, documented paper.
8. Specify time: when assignment is due; check points if any; opportunities for revision.

9. Specify evaluation procedures: according to what criteria will the paper be evaluated: presence of detailed and appropriate examples, careful documentation, originality, understanding of field, ability to bring together various points of view, structure of paper, absence of certain errors. Who will evaluate: teachers, peers, outside evaluator.
10. Other considerations:
Where does this assignment fit in relationship to previous assignments and following ones?

What skills/knowledge will the student already possess that will lead to successful completion of the assignment? What skills/knowledge will the student need to be taught before the assignment can be completed successfully?
4. FACULTY TAKE AN INTEREST IN THEIR STUDENTS' WRITING DIFFICULTIES AND OFFER HELP DURING THE WRITING PROCESS.

Although faculty indicate a willingness to help students with their writing, the survey provides no information on how frequently faculty offer to do this nor how often students take advantage of the offer. Students may not understand fully that papers usually go through several drafts before reaching a final state and that faculty critiques along the way could be very helpful. Again, this process can be helped if some assignments are designed so students proceed through stages in the writing process, checking off each stage with instructors. In this way, both students and instructors know how the work is proceeding and the chances of students finishing with an inferior product are reduced greatly.

5. FACULTY PERCEIVE STUDENTS AS HAVING SERIOUS WRITING PROBLEMS IN SOME AREAS.

Space did not permit faculty to offer specific explanations as to the kinds of problems students have with their writing. However, a review of the general writing problems identified in the survey suggest that two broad areas exist: (1) control of the subject matter (narrowing a topic, establishing a purpose, choosing appropriate organization, using evidence effectively, developing coherence and unity), (2) editing or proofreading skills (punctuation, spelling, usage, sentence construction, grammar),

The causes of these problems may be varied; among these, however, may be the following: for some students, dealing with unfamiliar subject material can cause many of the problems listed in area 1; if control is not developed there, then problems

in area 2 usually surface in final versions of a paper. Students also may not perceive that effective communication is important because it has not been consistently emphasized in their classes. A third cause may be that the student remains deficient in a number of skill areas and should be making use of services available to him or her through the Learning Center on campus; and still another reason may be that students are not writing frequently enough to keep their skills at a satisfactory level. Whatever the causes, serious writing problems exist, according to faculty, and need to be addressed.

6. FACULTY EXPRESS AN INTEREST IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT USING WRITING IN THEIR DISCIPLINES.

The fairly high indication of interest (67%) among faculty for learning more about using writing as a part of their course work is heartening. Such a response suggests that a dialogue can begin on the MSU campus that could lead to a much greater emphasis upon the development of writing skills among students. This dialogue could include discussions of the particular problems unique to writing in a specific discipline and how those problems might be overcome, ways of designing more effective assignments, ways of helping students understand the writing process, ways of emphasizing the importance of skills in revision and proofreading, ways for instructors to handle the paper load, and ways of evaluating student writing.

As a step toward that dialogue, the faculty at Murray State University, in conjunction with the anticipated move toward raising admission standards, may want to transmit a strong signal to the public schools sending students to Murray that writing skills are fundamentally important to the achievement of a college degree. Such a signal might be embodied in a university-wide policy statement which could include the following points:

1. That the clear, responsible use of the written and spoken language is the principal mark of the educated person.
2. That the faculty agrees that grades on papers which are poorly written, no matter what the course, should be reduced for the quality of the writing alone, if for no other reason.
3. That the faculty agrees that course grades may be lowered for persistently careless or otherwise sub-standard writing and that in extreme cases, a failing grade may be given for this reason alone.

4. That the university cannot offer a degree to any student whose careless and imprecise use of the language suggests a careless and imprecise intelligence; good writing, therefore, becomes a prerequisite for graduation.⁶

Following the establishment of such a policy statement, the faculty could then begin to involve themselves in devising methods for improving students' communication skills. Considerable time and study will be necessary to determine what form these methods should take. No one expects that every college instructor will become a writing teacher. But what can be expected is that every instructor will reveal through in-class emphasis that the written word is an important and vital link to communication. Skills in written communication are a means for increased knowledge and understanding as well as an essential means for maintaining contact with others. Richard Lloyd-Jones, Chairman of the Department of English at the University of Iowa, comments on this intrinsic value of writing in the following way:

The ability to use language defines humans, and the ability to use written language defines human ideas and emotions most precisely and enduringly. Often, as we write, we discover what we think and feel.

Our ability to control language in a variety of ways determines much of our adaptability in coping with our personal crises and with those of our jobs. To some extent we imagine the hopes and fears and abilities and motives of other people because we have the language with which to shape our empathy. In an important sense, all of our schooling is designed to make us better users of the language, so the quality of writing produced in and out of school must always be a central social problem.

Other problems may demand our short term attention, but in the long run our ability to write is a central issue of higher education.⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because the freshman English program is an integral part of the General Education requirements, we would like to cooperate with other departments and colleges in strengthening the university's commitment to writing excellence. As a starting point for this effort, we make the following recommendations:

1. That the academic vice-president in conjunction with the Academic Council establish a university composition committee to explore ways to enhance the quality of student writing. Among the issues that might be examined by the committee are the following:

- a. The feasibility of establishing a "second level" requirement in writing for all students to ensure continued development of writing skills after students complete English 101-102
 - b. Ways of increasing communication among colleges and departments concerning student writing and instructional practices
 - c. A study to determine if students' writing skills are, indeed, lower than they should be and, if so, how this problem might best be addressed
2. That the Teaching and Media Center explore the feasibility of sponsoring a series of seminars on the uses of writing in various disciplines.
 3. That the School Relations Office inform prospective students and high school guidance counselors of the need for students to present for admission, high school English requirements that reflect studies in language, literature, and composition and that in all such work, significant attention should have been given to expository writing. Preference will be shown to students presenting such background.
 4. That the English department and other departments where writing skills are important for academic success make efforts to open a dialogue about how the writing program in freshman English can lead naturally to the emphasis each department places on writing in its own discipline.

NOTES

¹Thomas Newkirk, et al., "What Johnny Can't Write: A University View of Freshman Writing Ability," English Journal, November 1977, pp. 65 - 69.

²Anne Ruggles Gere, "Writing and Writing," English Journal, November 1977, pp. 60 - 64.

³Elaine P. Maimon and Barbara F. Nodine, "Measuring Behavior and Attitude in the Teaching of Writing Among Faculties in Various Disciplines." Paper presented at Modern Language Association Convention, December 28, 1978 (ERIC ED 167 999).

⁴Charles R. Duke, "Basic Writing Skills Assessment Project: An Interpretative Report," Plymouth State College, Plymouth, New Hampshire, March 1978 (ERIC ED 153-245).

⁵James Hoetker and Gordon Brossell, "An E J Readership Survey: Who (if anyone) Is Teaching Them Writing and How?" English Journal, October 1979, pp. 19 - 25; see also James Hoetker and Gordon Brossell, "An E J Readership Survey Report," English Journal, May 1980, pp. 13 - 19.

⁶Adapted from Albert R. Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College, The Report of the Dartmouth Study of Student Writing (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), pp. 151 - 152.

⁷"Is Writing Worse Nowadays?" Iowa Spectator, April 1976, as quoted in Roger Applebee et al. Report on the Status of Student Writing in the College, College of Liberal Arts and Science, University of Illinois at Urbana, 1976, p. 62.

MSU WRITING SURVEY--STUDENTS

PART 1:

Directions: Using the categories listed below, please record on the accompanying answer sheet your response to each statement.

1	2	3	4	5
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	UNDECIDED

1. I enjoy writing.
2. Writing skills will be important in my career after college.
3. Students should be required to demonstrate a satisfactory level of reading and writing proficiency before graduation.
4. Freshman Composition should be required for all students.
5. Only faculty in the English department should concern themselves with students' writing skills.
6. Writing should be stressed and practiced in all General Education courses.
7. Faculty members within my own discipline can help me with my writing problems.
8. Students should take an upper division writing course in their major field.
9. Writing skills are necessary for making good grades in my major.
10. Essay exams reflect more accurately than objective tests what I have learned.
11. I have no major writing problems.
12. I get enough practice writing so that I feel confident when a writing assignment is given to me.
13. Faculty members have shared their writing with me in their classes.
14. I have no major difficulties writing papers for my classes.
15. My writing assignments are clear.
16. The audience for my writing is clear.
17. The only audience for my writing is the instructor.
18. The purpose for my writing is always clear.
19. I write more than one draft of a paper before submitting it.
20. My instructors encourage me to consult them about the preliminary drafts of my papers.
21. I seldom revise a paper before submitting it for a grade.
22. I am never allowed to use the first person pronoun (I) in my papers.
23. The majority of my writing assignments call for at least 500-1,000 words.
24. My written work is graded only for content.
25. In grading papers, instructors should give equal weight to writing quality as well as content.
26. My papers are returned promptly.
27. Instructors regularly return my papers with written comments indicating the strengths and weaknesses of my writing skills.
28. The standards used by my instructors in evaluating my work are clear.
29. My writing experiences in high school prepared me adequately for the writing required in freshman composition.
30. My writing experiences in freshman composition prepared me adequately for the writing required in other classes.

(PLEASE GO ON TO THE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS PAGE)

Part 2:

Directions: Please answer the question below, using the following categories to respond to each listed item; place your answers on the answer sheet.

1
YES

2
NO

3
DON'T KNOW

QUESTION: Do you have consistent, serious writing problems in the following areas:

31. Organization
32. Narrowing a topic
33. Supporting an idea
34. Sense of purpose
35. Awareness of audience
36. Voice
37. Tone
38. Style
39. Coherence
40. Unity
41. Paragraph structure
42. Sentence construction
43. Grammar
44. Usage
45. Transitions
46. Revising
47. Research skills (note-taking, summarizing, footnoting, etc.)
48. Capitalization
49. Punctuation
50. Spelling
51. Proofreading

PART 3:

Directions: Please indicate the type of assignments you are required to complete, using the following categories for your response; record your answers on the answer sheet.

1
NEVER

2
SOMETIMES

3
REGULARLY

52. Book reviews
53. Article reviews
54. Abstracts
55. Lab reports
56. Research papers
57. Business reports
58. Letters
59. Critical/analytical essays
60. Lesson plans/unit plans
61. Observation logs
62. Journals
63. Creative writing--short stories, poems, plays
64. Scripts
65. Essay exams